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UNCLAS CAIRO 004430

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SUBJECT: FAMILY-FRIENDLY TAXES AND DOCTORS WITHOUT

"LIMITS": EGYPTIAN MEDIA THEMES, JUNE 6 TO 12

REF: CAIRO 4127

1. Summary: The pro-government media highlighted a new tax law, signed by President Mubarak on June 8. TV talk shows hosted a parade of government spokesmen and financial experts who commented positively on the law over the weekend. Meanwhile, the opposition and independent press continued to criticize the government over the May 25 referendum, with the editor of a popular weekly attacking several leading political figures by name. The print media began to openly comment on rumored changes in the leadership of the pro-government press - the topic of discussion among journalists for the past month. A popular cartoonist attacked high medical costs in Egypt by lampooning doctors in a series of cartoons. End summary.

2. New tax law: Pro-government press and TV turned the spotlight away from the May 25 referendum and onto a new tax bill, signed by President Mubarak on June 8. The headline in pro-government Al Ahram (circulation: 750,000) on June 9 read: "Mubarak Signs New Tax Law Guaranteeing Higher Income and Standard of Living to All Egyptian Families." Highly positive (and lengthy) TV coverage showed Mubarak signing the new tax law in the presence of PM Nazif and other government leaders. Government spokesmen and financial experts appeared on Egyptian TV talk shows during the weekend to publicize the law. "This new law is a cultural leap. It establishes a new code of trust based on mutual respect between the taxpayer and the government," stated the Chairman of the Taxation Authority on Egyptian Channel 1's program "Economic Forum" on June 12. While the opposition press was largely quiet about the new tax law, one commentator in independent Nahdet Masr (circulation: 20,000) warned on June 12, "The average Egyptian now has to pay real taxes and receive real services."

3. Criticism of May 25 referendum continues: The Editor-in-chief of popular, independent weekly Sawt Al Umma (circulation: 50,000) attacked NDP Secretary General Safwat El Sherif and Speaker of the Parliament Fathi Sorour, writing on June 12: "[They] will try to remain in power until they get the last drop of Egypt's wealth. To bring about reform, these men should retire from public life." On June 11, a pro-reform commentator in Al Ahram highlighted President Bush's remarks about ensuring a free and open election in Egypt, commenting, "Egypt should implement real democracy to improve our image abroad." Opposition Al Wafd (circulation: 180,000) continued its critical coverage of the government's reform efforts by publishing a commentary by Islamist and regular Al Ahram contributor Fahmy Huweidy on June 10. Huweidy wrote that Egypt was "politically dead" and that this year's scheduled presidential elections would be "a farce."

4. Changes in pro-government press: The print media continued to buzz with rumors of a shake-up in the pro-government press (reftel). A commentator writing in Al Ahram one of the alleged targets of a shake-up - stated on June 7, "The criteria for choosing leadership and management according to their loyalty is not acceptable." The Editor-in-chief of independent Al Masry Al Youm (circulation: 20,000) complained in a June 12 commentary that, though changes were expected in the pro-government press, "nothing has changed." A commentator in the same newspaper wrote on June 8, "The government should make a statement about the upcoming changes in the (pro-government) press leadership and not leave us to sink in a sea of rumors."

5. Doctors without "limits": Popular cartoonist Mustafa Hussein of pro-government Al Akhbar (circulation: 800,000) published a series of cartoons June 5-12 criticizing doctors' fees in Egypt. The first cartoon in the series, published on June 5, shows a doctor escorting an old man to his clinic with exorbitant prices listed on the wall. "Doctors without borders," says the doctor, playing on the Arabic word "hudud" ("borders" or "limits") to joke about his prices. Another cartoon in the series, published on June 12, quotes a doctor talking to his friend (with an exorbitant clinic visit fee posted on the wall behind him): "I feel so sorry for the patients that I give them anesthesia before taking their money."

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